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Beyond Borders: Stories of Yunnanese Chinese Migrants of Burma

WEN-CHIN CHANG

Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014, xiii+278p.

Responding to a call for studies on the varied ethnic Chinese societies in host countries around the world, Wen-Chin Chang's *Beyond Borders* explores the whereabouts of the Yunnanese Chinese who migrated to Burma before and around the Chinese Communist Party's access to power in 1949, and addresses the issue of their consequent socio-political marginality.

General scholarly approaches consider migration as a flow of anonymous people, taken within a historico-political context that leaves them with little choice. They respond more or less effectively to impulsive economic ambitions and mercantile nature and are driven by despair and/or hope for a different life. In her account, Chang sketches a more subtle picture. Here, building on long-term relationships established within a community scattered over an extended territory that includes Yunnan, Burma, Thailand, and Taiwan and with some characters particular to the past two decades, Chang succeeds in bringing back faces, names, stories, anecdotes, and the individual experiences of these people. Anonymous heroes of forgotten struggles, incredible families, and motivated entrepreneurs all come to life through their stories. Chang's work sheds light on the fundamental entanglement of this community with unstable foreign and risky contexts that have compelled individuals to constantly redefine their very conditions of survival.

The book is organized into two main sections that each includes four chapters: the history of Yunnanese migrants' mobility in Burma, and their involvement in cross-border trade. Each of the chapters starts with a description of the author's field site and her approach to her informants through connections that echo throughout the whole book. This provides the reader with a sense of the importance of the community network. Chang also presents personal narratives that in their own way shed light on migrant's experiences in Burma. The eight chapters are dedicated to one community of this group, in turn represented by one or several individuals or by one theme that reveals a specific aspect of the history and the economic strategies that framed their settlement.

Be they refugees, soldiers, cross-border smugglers, caravans' muleteers, or jade traders, all have experienced extraordinary journeys that have led them and their families from Yunnan to Taiwan via Burma and Thailand over several generations. Chang approaches the success and failures of these groups which are characterized by their economic activity (with the exception of the Muslim Yunnanese and women) through several themes that emerge recurrently in most narratives: military conflicts, illegal trade, an underground banking system, drug addiction, constant displacement, the scattering of families, and social networks. In this specific context, the lives of Yunnanese migrants in Burma particularly enlighten Chinese diaspora diversity and struggles that sustain the laboring capacity that one more generally attribute them.

Beyond Borders provides insights on the ways different groups of Chinese refugees from

Yunnan, their families, and the subsequent generations established themselves in Burma and transcended their socio-political marginality. As refugees they lacked state recognition and protection and thus relied heavily on the support of the remaining Kuomintang army. Still, the accounts provided by Chang's informants give the impression that collecting the life story of any Yunnanese migrant in Burma can disclose a series of fascinating and challenging adventures. First of all, they show how trade and migration trajectories are intertwined with local politics, ethnic conflicts, and a balance of power that, according to the period, could favor or ostracize the presence of Chinese and their activities. Indeed, despite this uneven context, life stories also reveal how the constant interconnection between Yunnanese ethnic groups—be they social or military—and Burmese ethnic groups led to business collaborations that benefited many. Several informants emphasized how relationships with local groups (ethnic minorities and Burmese) can fluctuate, vacillating between, on the one hand, kindness and good neighborhood milieus with ethnic groups such as the Shan, and, on the other hand, contempt and avoidance of the Burmese. Nonetheless the book offers an alternative depiction of the bond that Han Chinese can establish with other ethnic groups once they escape the dominant political propaganda emanating from China.

In the framework of a context that reveals the fragility of imposed ethnic categories and boundaries, Chang's analysis explores two specific aspects of this very mobile community: initial marginality and transnationalism. What could be perceived as contradictory characteristics actually constitute a driving force for families determined to not only survive but to go beyond the structural limits that their mobility and status inflicted upon them in pursuit of a better life. The book praises the Yunnanese spirit, resistance, strength, and networking ability, as well as their mercantile consciousness. For many of the first-generation Yunnanese who settled in Burma, migration was the only option to escape their socio-political position in China (be that the Kuomintang army, or any of the "black categories," as defined during the Cultural Revolution, i.e. landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionaries, bad-influencers, and right-wingers) but it also entailed switching their position in the social hierarchy by taking whatever jobs are available in their new surroundings to make a living.

To endure marginality in the first period of settlement, Yunnanese migrants relied on both their intragroup behavior and external support. Most life stories emphasize the importance given to maintaining their identity in a foreign country, i.e. their cultural roots (food, language, and religion education), and transmitting their values (solidarity, anti-communism, and religion), in a distinctive way separate from the Fujianese and Cantonese Chinese settled in south Burma who are, according to the Yunnanese, more acculturated. To survive, the Yunnanese Chinese have demonstrated a strong sense of initiative and creativity, using all their potential skills to overcome challenges and frictions in an insecure environment. To support them, the Kuomintang army based in Burma since their escape from China resettled in northern Thailand in the 1960s. Their incomes came from controlling drug trafficking trade in jade stones and the protection of caravans. This

provided Yunnanese migrants with an informal economic surrounding to reconstruct their lives in Burmese society despite their vulnerable status and allowed them to develop a form of community coherence and solidarity.

Thanks to their fascinating ability to rely on and extend their families and their ethnic and religious networks, these migrants were able to tackle their marginal status. On several levels, the strength of these networks has allowed them to undertake and sustain individual risk-taking projects. Chang calls these national and transnational networks the “intragroup nexuses,” or connections based on references rather than familiarity (in the context of mobility). The life stories of this book clearly demonstrate how social and economic survival depends on mobility, opportunities, and connections. Still, they also stress that serendipity and unexpected encounters can lead to different paths. The intimate dimension of migration disclosed in some accounts (see Guoguang’s story, chapter 3) emphasizes that individual’s destinies rely as much on unhappy circumstances as on fortunate encounters. Transnationalism, as experienced by the Yunnanese migrants in Burma, is about maintaining social connections between their home society Yunnan and the societies of settlement such as Burma, followed by Thailand and Taiwan. Particularly inspiring is the case of the Yunnanese Muslims (chapter 4), a closely tied group within the Chinese community. Because of their religious links with Muslim countries, their mobility takes them beyond Asia. They adjust to their host societies either through their cultural roots (while studying in Arab countries, they connect with other Asians) or their religious faith (after migrating to Taiwan, they connect with other Muslims), according to their needs. Therefore, the Muslim Yunnanese are an example of dynamism and flexibility. Despite unavoidable sacrifices, these two qualities have helped them transcend their double marginality (Chinese and Muslim) within the frame of a double transnational network: the regional Chinese diaspora *and* the international Islamic community.

The strength of this book is the space the author gives to personal narratives. In this refreshing ethnography, Chang demonstrates how the vivid descriptions of life trajectories and intimate relationships of ordinary people, supported by clear explanations on the chaotic historical political circumstances in which they are grounded, can be more revealing than reconstituted realities inspired by scarce documentation available to foreign observers. This is precisely the value of Chang’s work. Her perspective steps around the economic performance of the Chinese diaspora and concentrates on linking national history with people’s lives in a very enlightening and lively way.

This is definitely a richly documented account of the historical roots of Yunnanese settlements in Burmese borderlands, their influence, and their involvement with trade. Banned by the Burmese government and only protected by armed ethnic groups, Yunnanese cross-border trade with Thailand supported the Burmese economy during its socialist regime. During the dictatorial military regime, trade with China became prominent but was still a risky business until the new democratic

regime allowed more flexibility and new influx of Chinese. Chang delivers a rich analysis of this complex context through the words of those once involved in this underground yet dynamic economy. She provides reliable figures on the ground realities that were difficult to investigate when they were taking place. Doing so draws out how transnationalism has been practiced by Yunnanese migrants and how it has partially transformed the region. Chang also questions the usual understanding of borders as remote areas negatively labelled as “wasteland, backward and lawless” (p. 174) with a limited perspective. Even though Yunnanese migrants have been living on the margins of the Burmese state, they have contributed to opening the country to the outside world, and participated in its economic survival, revealing the double nature of borderlands as “peripheral and central, separate and connected” (p. 174).

Less convincing maybe is the section related to gender roles and women’s involvement in the economic sphere. Chang draws on her informants’ life trajectories, their plight, and their struggle to overcome fatalism driven by commitment to their family well-being. Although the author’s analysis of these stories is convincing, it is not specific to this particular group and would have become more interesting if she had adopted a comparative perspective. Regarding the issue of gender roles and expectations, many of the Yunnanese women’s narratives challenge the usual stereotypes on hardworking and responsible Chinese men, and highlight the contrasting and unusual image of brave and strong women compelled to take on the breadwinning role of the family. In this case, one can observe similar strategies in several societies in Southeast Asia where women who find themselves trapped between their traditional duty and their unreliable husbands are constrained to find ways to ensure their family’s survival. Furthermore, the author’s arguments could have benefited from further comparison with the difficult position of other mobile diaspora in the region, such as Chinese in Northern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Nyíri 2012; Tan 2012), or ethnic groups in Yunnan related to Burmese ethnic guerrillas for instance.

Besides the fascinating stories that nourish this account of a largely ignored Chinese diaspora, and the rigorous historical approach to their contemporary situation, this book is also a real pleasure to read. It distinguishes itself from other academic works that often tend to overload ethnographic accounts with excessive references and global perspectives that sometimes seem artificially developed. Moreover, the author shares her ethnographer experiences with a confounding honesty and vivid descriptions (with the occasional doubts), recalling her feelings in the process of collecting life stories. In a sense we are able to feel the closeness that she has cultivated with her informants and their families who gave her privileged insights into their lives. Simultaneously this has exposed the limits of her objectivity. Chang questions the boundaries of the anthropologist with humility, adding a personal touch that is rare, while providing a sense of the ethnographer’s proximity to her informants, and the degree of mutual trust and expectations such fragile relationships implicitly entail (chapters 2, 3).

Despite the lack of comparative perspective that would have enhanced further the unique

specificities of Yunnanese migrants in Burma, *Beyond Borders* remains an academic achievement and a very relevant addition to the literature on diasporas in Southeast Asia. Works like this inevitably improve our understanding of the socioeconomic and political changes currently occurring in this strategic country.

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The Politics of Protection Rackets in Post-New Order Indonesia: Coercive Capital, Authority and Street Politics

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Seventeen years have passed since the fall of Suharto’s New Order regime. Indonesia’s *reformasi* has since been lauded as a successful case of democratization. Despite the consolidation of institutional democracy, however, some critics have argued that the conventional system of power relations established by the end of New Order still persists, while others have argued that distribution of power and material resources is still under the strong influence of a small number of very wealthy individuals (Ford and Pepinsky 2014). By giving a clear account of the changing condition regarding the politics of racketeering and mass organizations in Jakarta, this book illustrates that the principle of local politics fundamentally altered after the end of the authoritarian regime.

The originality of this study is twofold: it sees Jakarta as a site of local politics rather than the center of national politics; it also sheds lights on the positive side of mass mobilization. Studies on mass mobilization in decentralizing Indonesia have been predominantly about the local politics of regions outside Jakarta, if not about politics at a national level. More importantly, they have largely disregarded the potential for mass organizations to be “advocates on issues of immediate consequence to their members and the neighborhoods in which they live” (p. 94).

In Chapter 1, “Protection, Violence and the State,” the author sets up the theoretical framework for his study. Following Charles Tilly, the author starts by denying the state’s complete